

# **Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?**

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1. I have fond memories of the Linguistic Society of America meeting in New Orleans just after Christmas in 1988, the last time I was able to see all my humanist friends from graduate school who were attending the concurrent meeting of the MLA. Shortly after that, the LSA decided to forego the company of humanists and assemble by itself during the first week of January. It's hard to fault the decision. Over and above the obvious practical advantages, like not having to wait in line for forty-five minutes outside popular restaurants, the groups had been growing apart intellectually for some time. Few linguists bothered to cross town for MLA sessions on topics like onomastics, English usage, and the history of lexicography. Nor for that matter were those sessions drawing many MLA attendees, either. Literary people didn't seem to be much interested in language study anymore; what filled their ballrooms now were the sessions on deconstruction and other poststructuralist enthusiasms. It was like going back for your annual drink with your high-school sweetheart and finding that you had less and less to talk about. They didn't know what subjacency was and we didn't know what alterity was, and neither seemed to care.

If you were of a mind to look for milestones, you could take that as the time when linguistic semantics definitively cut itself loose from its philological roots. Like a lot of semanticists, I had mixed feelings about the break. It's undeniable that linguistic semantics couldn't have come of age as an autonomous empirical discipline if it hadn't

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narrowed its sights to concentrate on phenomena that were amenable to rigorous formal treatment. In the course of things, though, that entailed the marginalization of other issues that belonged strictly to philology.<sup>2</sup> Modern formal semantics has little or nothing to offer to people interested in usage, connotation, or the kinds of words whose meanings can't be easily extracted from the social custard they're swimming around in — we are good on the verb *taste*, but have little to say about the noun. It's true that there are plenty of semanticists who haven't drawn the circle so narrowly, and who still think of their brief in broadly "cultural" terms. But with a few exceptions, cognitive linguistics has been as sedulously structuralist and universalist as more explicitly formal approaches. Whereas philology has always been anchored in historical particulars — as Lenin might have put it, it's an effort to build semantics in one country.

2. By the time *Linguistics and Philosophy* first appeared, in any event, semantics had cut its ties with philology and criticism and was redefining itself as a branch of applied philosophy and applied logic. The spirit of the age is evident in a passage from Austin ((Austin, 1961), p. 232) that Jerry Katz used as a hopeful epigraph for his 1974 book *Semantic Theory*:

In the history of human inquiry, philosophy has the place of the initial central sun, seminal and tumultuous: from time to time it throws off some portion of itself to take station as a planet, cool and well regulated, progressing steadily towards a distant final state. This happened long ago at the birth of mathematics, and again at the birth of physics: only in the last century we have witnessed the same process once again, slow and at the time imperceptible, in the birth of the science of mathematical logic.. . Is it not possible that the next century may see the birth,

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<sup>2</sup> For a lot of people today, philology is just an old-fashioned name for old-fashioned diachronic linguistics. But I'm thinking of it here in a more specific historical sense, as the consideration of words as the embodiments and expressions of culture, an enterprise closely attached to criticism. That conception is suggested by the title of Arsène Darmesteter's 1887 book *La Vie des Mots* (a title that I think we are also supposed to take as implying *l'avis des mots*, "the counsel of words").

through the joint labours of philosophers, grammarians, and numerous other students of language, of a true and comprehensive *science of language*?

It would be hard to argue that linguistic semantics has become "cool and well regulated" since Austin wrote (nor is that likely to happen until the field is repopulated with a less disputatious genetic stock). But there's no question that the field has benefited enormously from its philosophical turn. Whole subfields of semantics have congealed around some of the clumps of gas thrown off by that by that seminal philosophical sun, like Montague's PTQ, Grice's William James lectures, and Austin and Searle's books on speech acts. And right behind them come other philosophical writers who have been enormously influential on particular lines of semantic research, like Davidson on events, Lewis on counterfactuals, and Stalnaker on presupposition — not to mention Katz, whose influence has been more pervasive than you might conclude from his profile in the semantics citation indexes in recent years.

Granted, semanticists would very likely have gotten around to a lot of these themes and approaches moving under their own steam. Someone would have tumbled to work in categorial grammar even if Montague hadn't lit the way. And semanticists didn't really need Grice to awaken them to the importance of context in interpretation (though it's unlikely that anyone else would have come up with four overarching maxims, much less called them that). But then, the fact that we would have had light bulbs even if Edison had never lived doesn't mean we don't need to thank him for an illuminating contribution.

Still, linguistic semanticists have been choosy about which philosophical suggestions they decided to pick up on, and you could compile an impressive list of important recent works in philosophy of language whose influence on semantic theory has been slight or negligible. Take Putnam's "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" (Putnam, 1975) and Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke, 1972) (henceforth MM and NN). If you went solely on the frequency with which those essays are cited in the literature of linguistic semantics, you might conclude that both are minor philosophical contributions with few consequences for semantic analysis. They certainly haven't sparked much of a linguistic interest in natural-kind terms or proper names, and when those topics do come up, for example in the literatures on generics and definiteness, it's rarely in connection with the questions that Putnam and Kripke raised about them. For all that semanticists

take them seriously as philosophy, the essays clearly haven't suggested any lines of empirical inquiry that semanticists find it interesting to follow up on.

Of course it isn't necessary that a contribution to the philosophy of language should have any empirical consequences at all — for example, it's unlikely that anything we could tell philosophers about the structure of English would help them to decide whether the bearers of truth-values are sentences or propositions. And much of the burden of Kripke and Putnam's essays is clearly extraneous to linguistic concerns, particularly as they bear on questions of reference. That's a topic that linguists have always had a disinclination to deal with head-on, on the unexceptionable grounds that it would compromise the autonomy of the enterprise: we wouldn't want a theory of *John walks* to depend crucially on a commitment to metaphysical essentialism. Indeed, the success of the program of modern linguistic semantics has rested on being able to keep questions of reference at a safe analytical remove: we roll along merrily without worrying about where (or for that matter, whether) the rubber actually meets the road.

That view of the linguistic irrelevance of MM and NN accords with the way philosophers have tended to read the essays, as fables whose morals for metaphysics and the philosophy of mind can be addressed without having to pay much attention to the way actual languages work. The fact is, though, that both Putnam and Kripke grounded their theories in a host of claims about language use, most of them couched in the ideal form to spark empirical inquiry: extremely suggestive in their broad outlines and exasperatingly muddled in their crucial details. And these points have been taken up in a few of the most thoughtful critical reactions to the essays, like John Dupre's response to Putnam (Dupre (Dupre, 1981)) and Gareth Evans' response to Kripke (Evans (Evans, 1977)), both of which offered counter-examples and telling observations about the way words are used — the fact that *cedar* is actually defined according to the hardness of its wood, or that *Madagascar* originated as the name of a region on the African coast. If you squinted your eyes the right way, you see those discussions as a kind of rude philology, in the sense that they're concerned with the way words live in societies. And it's revealing that linguists themselves haven't found anything here worth following up on.

There are various reasons for this, but I think the most important of them is that both Putnam and Kripke began with the basic observation that we sometimes use words

without knowing what they mean, or who exactly they designate.<sup>3</sup> And there's no place for this sort of concern in a discipline that has historically constituted itself around the assumption that the proper object of description is the linguistic knowledge of a member of a "completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly," as Chomsky put it in *Aspects*. It's true that sociolinguists have taken that formulation to task for its blanket assumption of linguistic homogeneity, but not even they have been bothered by the second part of it, the idealization to what economists call perfect information.<sup>4</sup> And yet nothing is plainer than that we *don't* always know what (or who)

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<sup>3</sup> Some people I've talked to have suggested that another likely reason for the linguistic neglect of MM and NN is that neither Putnam nor Kripke taught an analytic method, the way Montague and Grice did. That's true to a point — or at least the methods the essays do teach, like the argument from Twin Earth examples, hasn't had much appeal to linguists, who have enough trouble squaring their intuitions about actual states of affairs. But then Davidson didn't really offer a formal method for thinking about events and was influential nonetheless, probably because he didn't have to persuade linguists to become interested in events in the first place.

<sup>4</sup> The only linguist I know of who has addressed this claim critically is R. A. Hudson, in his textbook *Sociolinguistics* (Hudson, 1980). He writes (p. 192):

In a much quoted passage, we find the suggestion that "linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal-speaker listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, *who knows its language perfectly . . .*" It is hard not to interpret this as a claim that some speakers — perhaps all non-ideal ones — know their community's language *less* than perfectly, with the implication that there is some absolute standard against which an individual's knowledge of his language may be judged. It should be clear that no such absolute standard exists unless one is created as a prescriptive exercise.

I have no doubt that if you pressed Hudson with some Putnam-like examples — "But surely not everybody knows exactly what *acacia* means" — he'd say, "Oh, but I wasn't talking about words like *that*." But the unqualified indignation of the passage gives a

we are talking about, and that language could hardly work if things were otherwise. (Try to imagine a human society in which nobody could use a word he didn't know the full meaning of — how would people talk to car mechanics and contractors?)

One reasonable response to this might be to say that the sorts of disparities in knowledge that Putnam and Kripke are talking about really aren't very interesting from the point of view of linguistic description: there's nothing to be learned about the structure of natural languages from examining the incomplete or degenerate meanings that individual speakers may have internalized. Putnam's sorry mental representation of an elm doesn't have any interesting semantic properties that distinguish it from Luther Burbank's. As Jerry Fodor puts it, (Fodor, 1995), p. 93: ". . . the notion of a 'deferential' concept [a concept referred to an expert for clarification — GN] really belongs to epistemology and not to semantics."

But these observations have a different significance when we consider them from the point of view of the speech-community, and ask how all these heterogeneities are negotiated. How does our linguistic economy manage to function when everybody's using words on credit? Never mind whether there is an interesting linguistic story here — is there any interesting story at all?

It's true that Putnam doesn't make this question easier to ask with the story he tells about the meaning of *elm*. For one thing, he got the story wrong, probably because he was misled by his metaphysical preoccupations. *Elm* and the like aren't really natural-kind terms like genuine scientific terms like *Australopithecus*, which live or die according to the way scientists define them. The real experts on the meaning of *elm* are naturalists or landscape gardeners; they may outsource the job of elm-definition to scientists, but only on approval — if the characteristics the botanists come back with don't accord with their interests, they feel free to ignore them.

In any case, the division of linguistic labor is hardly restricted to the names of plants and minerals and the like.<sup>5</sup> And when we think about it, the heterogeneity of

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sense of how far linguists have gone in repressing these commonsensical facts about the linguistic division of labor.

<sup>5</sup> Evans (Evans, 1977) made this point about words like *viol* and *minuet*.

semantic knowledge is a complicated business indeed. There are words we use "with the intention of conforming to the general use made of them by the community," as Evans (Evans, 1977) put it — *shrub* and *lawn*, for example. And there are words we use deferentially, "with the over-riding intention of conforming to the use made of them by some other person or persons," a phenomenon that can affect expressions of all sorts. There are people who have the job of knowing what *tartan* means and people who have the job of knowing what *feudalism* means; there are even people who have the job of knowing what *irony* means. There are people who illegitimately claim authority over the meanings of certain words (in which case the rest of us describe the words as "jargon"), and there are people who are assigned authority over words even when they don't pretend to merit it (the public has obliged economists to construct an *ad hoc* technical definition for *recession*, but they will privately tell you that a recession is no more a technical category than a bad hair day). There are the doubly deferential words that the experts in one speech-community farm out to the experts in another — not just contingent natural-kind terms like *elm*, but words like *savoir-faire* and *arugula*.

We can read Kripke's account of proper names as a story about expertise, as well. Why do we say that *Methodism* and *National Socialism* are proper names while *deism* and *socialism* aren't?<sup>6</sup> It can't be just a question of orthography, which can only follow our intuitions, nor is it a question of the kinds of denotations that the words have — if National Socialism is an individual thing, then socialism is, too. But socialism is a category that's extended over what we individuate as diverse historical contexts and national experiences, so that the meaning of the term can't be fixed for all time by reference to a single exemplar, the way the meaning of *National Socialism* can. Or to speak in quasi-Kripkean terms, our collective use of *National Socialism* is causally connected to a single historical context, whereas we allow the meaning of *socialism* to evolve according to our changing perception of our common interests, pegging itself to

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<sup>6</sup> Note the difference in the way we talk about the meanings of these words; we say "She doesn't know the meaning of *deism*" but not "She doesn't know the meaning of *Methodism*."

new exemplars in the process.<sup>7</sup> In effect, the difference between the two categories is in the historical particularity of the expertise that we call on to explicate them. And that may be all there is to the distinction.

3. But we can't talk about the sociosemantic complexities of languages without allowing that there might be such things as languages in the first place, which is a point that linguists have been adamantly unwilling to accept. As we tell the story, an Englishman and an American who believe that they speak "the same language" are simply suffering from a *folie à deux* brought about by the fortuitous homonymy of the name *English*, and similarly for dialects, varieties, and all the other forms of collective representations which linguists insist can only be analytic conveniences, but which ordinary people find wholly uncontroversial. (I suspect Putnam would be surprised to learn that there were people who would see anything problematic in talking about "the meaning of the English word *elm*.")

It's an oddly extensionalist position for linguists to take, particularly given their general impatience with realist accounts of reference. And if other people find the linguists' view implausible, it isn't because of deficiencies in their empirical understanding, but because it flies in the face of ordinary social experience. The fact is that people's mutual beliefs that they speak a common language have a performative character: saying that there are no languages because we can't discern natural classes of linguistic rules or practices is like saying that there are no racial groupings in American society because we can't discern any basis for them in population genetics. If Englishmen and Americans tend to use the word *vanity* in a uniform way, it isn't simply because of a historical accident, the way it is when their uses of the word come out meaning more or less the same thing that *vanité* does in French. It's because they perceive a common interest in coordinating this particular linguistic practice, to the point where an American

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<sup>7</sup> *Communism* used to be a common noun, but since 1989 it has been shifting (back) to a proper name. Not long ago, I saw a reference in the Los Angeles *Times* to "the fall of Communism," with the implication that everything that had happened since Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station was a single historical episode.

lexicographer feels free to cite an English author by way of exemplifying the use of the word, and vice-versa.<sup>8</sup>

This talk of coordinating practices brings to mind another important contribution to the philosophy of language that semanticists haven't had much to say about, David Lewis's reconstruction of the notion of a linguistic convention (Lewis, 1969).<sup>9</sup> But here again the philosophical groundwork needs to be reworked before it can be useful in the empirical hurly-burly — not so much because Lewis gets the linguistic details wrong, the way Putnam and Kripke do, but because he idealizes away from them. For his purposes, it's sufficient to take the content of a linguistic convention to be a language system in its entirety.<sup>10</sup> But what we refer to as "the English language" is a hodge-podge of conventions defined over a hodge-podge of speech-communities: not just the linguistic community (e.g., what we refer to as "the English-speaking world"), but all of the sub-communities that constitute it along its various axes, Hobbes's "many lesser Commonwealths in the bowels of a greater." When we use the word *vanity*, we are speaking in our

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<sup>8</sup> In this sense the rules of language have not just descriptive but ethical force; as the philosopher James Beattie wrote in 1783: "To speak as others speak is one of those tacit obligations, annexed to the condition of living in society, which we are bound in conscience to fulfil, though we have never ratified them by any express promise; because, if they were disregarded, society would be impossible, and human happiness at an end." ((Beattie, 1783), p. 240.) The relation between linguistic convention and language norms is explored by Renate Bartsch in her *Norms of Language* (Bartsch, 1987), an important exception to the general neglect of these questions by semanticists.

<sup>9</sup> Unlike Putnam and Kripke's work, Lewis's has had a certain methodological influence on work in semantics — he can claim a lot of the credit for having introduced semanticists to the notion of common knowledge, or at least for convincing them that it can be unpacked in a rigorous way. But semanticists almost never invoke that notion with regard to the nature of linguistic conventions themselves.

<sup>10</sup> More precisely, the content of a Lewisian convention is being truthful in a language, but that's a point we can ignore here. (Anyway, Cretan was a language, too, even if all its speakers were liars.)

general capacity as Anglophones. But we can only get our cars fixed or buy vegetables in our local capacities as Americans, Englishmen, Australians, or whatever. Rutabagas here are swedes there, and even when we do all use the same name for a vegetable, the way we do for carrots, you have the sense it's just a lucky accident, the same way it is when the name *carrot* turns out to have a cognate *carotte* in French.

Even so, the pairing of conventions and communities isn't random. There are certain words that we expect the language itself to define for us, rather than one of its subcommunities. It isn't surprising to learn that the Australians have their own characteristic word for sidewalks, but we would be taken aback to be told that they use the words *assiduous* and *blatant* differently from the way other English-speakers do. And it can be instructive to look at the vocabulary that English-speakers have essentially in common (I mean as opposed to the words we have only accidentally in common, like *carrot*): it can help us to make more concrete the nature of languages as social types, and clarify what Trollope described as the "common mental culture" that Anglophones share — a philological exercise *par excellence*.<sup>11</sup>

But there are a lot of questions on the way there that are more narrowly linguistic. How do we determine which of the words we know belong to which speech-communities? (It can't be simply by induction — otherwise how could I be confident that the inhabitants of New Zealand use *vanity* the same way I do without ever having been there?) And more generally, how do we analyze the whole of the grammars we've internalized as the cumulation of the conventions of various overlapping groups and communities? In a sense, that would be just a reprise of Uriel Weinreich's "structural dialectology," but from an internalist rather than externalist point of view.

4. It's a curious state of affairs: semantics abandoned philology to attach itself to philosophy, and philosophy promptly started to throw off philological problems that semantics was no longer in a position to offer any help with. I don't mean to suggest that semanticists have been remiss or neglectful here. Work on the causal theory of reference might suggest a new theoretical interest in the historical study of proper names, but

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Nunberg (Nunberg, 1999).

semanticists aren't under any professional obligation to pursue the topic. From the linguistic point of view, after all, there has always been something opportunistic about the philosophical turn: we have our own agendas. In this sense, Austin's metaphor is misleading: philosophy has been less like a seminal sun than a rummage sale that sometimes offers useful items for the home improver.

Even so, the issues here are as promisingly complicated as a lot of the other strains of semantic research that have taken philosophical speculations as their points of departure. The question is, who can we count on to bell this cat? Not philosophers, certainly, many of whom still give you the impression of having acquired their ideas about language from the Sunday-supplement grammarians. (Here, at least, Austin's metaphor is on the right track: even now, too many philosophers regard linguistics in the manner of a sun-king considering a remote tributary.) And when it comes to the crunch, a lot of the most interesting questions that these essays raise aren't really philosophical at all — Kripke could be right about naming even if he were wrong about necessity.

In the end, these are questions for semanticists — not in a professional capacity, but in virtue of their broader interests (we may no longer be philologists, but most of us are still logophiles). In this regard, it doesn't really matter if the issues are "linguistic" in any sense of the term.<sup>12</sup> If you like, think of them as belonging to another discipline, spinning around the philosophical sun in an orbit exactly 180 degrees opposed to our own, whose practitioners are still standing patiently in line outside K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen.

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<sup>12</sup> Putnam himself suggested that he was offering a "sociolinguistic hypothesis," and in theory, I suppose these questions would have to be sociolinguistic in some sense of the term. The fact is, though, that modern sociolinguists aren't in a position to deal with them, given both their predilection for quantitative methods and the simplification of social divisions that those methods generally force people to assume. (The problem with sociolinguistics, Roland Barthes once said, is that it addresses the divisions of social groups "only insofar as they are struggling for power," with the result that all of the social complexity of languages is reduced to "a half-psychological, half-sociological arrangement, the desire for *promotion* (Barthes, 1986), p. 117.)

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